History

The following first year history essay answered this question:

*Why did the British establish a penal settlement at Botany Bay, Australia?*

Student essay

The latter half of the eighteenth century was a time of war and competition for much of the world. It was a time when imperialistic ventures and strategies. It was a time when economic and military gains meant wealth, and wealth meant power. Humiliation by America in the form of revolution and a declaration of independence did not sit well with such a powerful nation as Britain. And to top it all off, the nation was overflowing with convicts waiting to be transported "for [their] country's good." The conditions were right for Britain to reassert her power and extend her influence to a new part of the globe. Thus in 1786, the decision to colonise New South Wales at Botany Bay was declared.

The debate as to the overriding motive for the choice of Botany Bay has long been contested. The traditional argument asserts that the primary reason for the settlement at Botany Bay was in reaction to the overcrowded gaols and hulks: New South Wales was to be a dumping ground for the convicts of Britain. Those in favour of this argument question that had this not been a problem, would New South Wales ever have been colonised by Britain? However, it cannot be ignored that Botany Bay was attractive for several reasons besides its apparent fertile soil and suitable climate conducive to the transportation and establishment of the convicts. Reports from Captain James Cook and Sir Joseph Banks, and proposals by James Matra, John Call and George Young all mention the strategic economic and naval advantages that Botany Bay offered. The more the British found out about Botany Bay, the more attractive the new country became. The question could be posed, if Britain were so desperate to solve the problem of overcrowding in its gaols and hulks, why wasn't the choice of Botany Bay examined years earlier? The cost of sending convicts so far away could be justified by the countless other advantages that could be reaped from the land down under. Thus, it can be asserted that "Transportation was the mode but not the motive of Britain's colonisation of Australia."?

---

1 Frost, *Botany Bay Mirages*, p.10
2 *ibid*, p.40
When America revolted in 1776, Britain's policy of transporting criminals was abruptly halted. In the expectation that the situation would soon be resolved, the convicts were kept temporarily in hulks. However, as the problem persisted and the numbers of convicts sentenced to transportation continued to increase, the hulks soon became overcrowded. Conditions were unsanitary, diseases such as typhus and smallpox spread out of control, several convicts escaped, and it was feared that the hulks acted as "schools of villainy and vice." Thus, merchants in charge of the hulks such as Duncan Campbell of the Justitia, set about improving conditions and instituting rehabilitation schemes in the hulks. Changes in government policy abated overcrowding by sending some convicts to serve in the army and navy. The 'Hulks Act' in 1779 sentenced many to hard labour raising sand, gravel and soil and clearing the water and banks on the Thames for three to ten years, and still others were granted pardon for good behaviour. The numbers of convicts in the hulks continued to fall due to these policy changes, the expiration of sentences, and the decrease of convicts sentenced to transportation. Conditions in the hulks continued to improve until the decision was made to reinstate transportation in 1784. It was then that the numbers began to rapidly rise once again. Frost was very perceptive to assert that contrary to popular opinion, "the decision to transport criminals to Botany Bay did not relate directly to the presence of large numbers of criminals but rather was consequent upon earlier decisions, taken at times when the numbers were not extraordinary, to reassert transportation as a central aspect of British penal practice". Once again, overcrowding became a problem, and Botany Bay offered the answer.

Britain considered several areas before deciding on Botany Bay, many of which were considered for more reasons than just to serve as a convict colony. The Committee on Transportation that was established to make this decision reported that the Plan of establishing a Colony of young Convicts in some distant Part of the Globe, and in New-discovered Countries, where the Climate is healthy, and the Means of Support attainable, is equally agreeable to the Dictates of Humanity and sound Policy, and might prove in the Result advantageous both to Navigation and Commerce. (emphasis added).

---

3 Manning Clark in *ibid*, p. 13.
4 *ibid*, p. 40.
5 Frost, *Convicts and Empire*, p.8.
The Committee was seriously considering the area of Das Voltas Bay based on initial reports of a fertile environment and suitable climate, as well as the presence of copper in the mountains (which was becoming of great strategic importance), “a fine Bay and Harbour for the Shelter of Shipping,” and also the hope that it might “promote the Purposes of future Commerce or of future Hostility in the South Seas.” However, this option was abandoned when a survey of the area in 1786 yielded very disappointing results. The option of Lemain on the River Gambia was supported by the probability “that it would in a short series of Years be of considerable Advantage to this Country...[as] Gold is often found in the Interior Parts as well as other articles of value.” This scheme, however, had to be called off due to the wet season, and problems with the natives. Thus, an ‘ulterior motive’ was always a consideration.

According to the reports of Captain James Cook and Sir Joseph Banks, Botany Bay offered many advantages, including a coastal area with a sheltered port, friendly natives, a pleasant climate, fertile soil, food sources including wild fruits, vegetables, birds and fish: an environment in which they could be self-sufficient in a year. It was also attractive due to its great distance from Britain and the fact that the convicts would have no means of escape. In addition, it offered two significant advantages: it was a strategic stronghold in the East and it promised to be an important naval store of flax, hemp and timber.

Britain’s sources of naval supplies were endangered with the onset of the American Revolutionary War. The timber that it had once obtained from New England was no longer available for obvious reasons, and the flax and hemp that had been secured from Russia were in jeopardy as well due to Russia's sympathy for America. The Seven Years War in 1756-1763 and the American Revolution in 1776-1783 had left the British Navy seriously damaged. In 1781, Sir Samuel Hood described the strange fatality that seems to have attended the operations of his Majesty’s fleet in these seas for some time past, not four ships in the whole are in a fit state to go any distance with a view of meeting the enemy, being totally destitute of spare masts, yards, sails and every other species of stores. Call observed that unless something was done about the situation “very serious consequences [were] to be apprehended in diminution of the Strength and Durability of the Royal Navy.” In an attempt to increase its own supplies of timber, flax, and hemp, Britain set up an investigation into its Royal lands and forests. Upon discovering

---

6 Beauchamp Committee in ibid p. 43.
7 Gillen, 'Convicts, Not Empire', English Historical Review, CCLXXV, October 1982, p. 759.
8 Frost, Botany Bay Mirages, p. 62.
9 Frost, Convicts and Empire, p. 24.
that great improvements were needed, a widespread oak reforestation was recommended in 1782. Thus, at this time, Cook's descriptions of the flax that covered the shores of Norfolk Island and New Zealand so that it was "scarce possible to get through it" and the "Spruce Pines which grow [there] in vast abundance and to a vast size, from two to three diameter and upwards" were very appealing. This fact was recognised in Lord Sydney's 'Heads of a Plan' when he stated "It may not be amiss to remark in favor of this Plan that considerable advantage will arise from the Cultivation of the new Zealand Hemp, or Flax Plant in the new intended Settlement, the supply of which would be of great consequence to us as a Naval Power..." Botany Bay was looking even more promising.

Britain was also lacking in significant bases for trading purposes. They had just lost their most significant holdings with the American Revolution and were far behind the other superpowers regarding strategic holdings in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The only site which Britain possessed between Europe and India was St. Helena, a small island with no harbour, and not easily reached from Britain due to the prevailing south-east winds. Based on descriptions from Matra, Britain had the conception that New South Wales was located conveniently close to the Indian Sub-Continet, China, the East Indies, and the Spice Islands, and only about a month's trip from the Cape of Good Hope. It had the potential to be the centre of a lucrative trading network with Asia involving spices, fur and tea. It was also strategically located so they might attack the Dutch in the East Indies and the Spanish in the Philippines safely and easily. The need to strengthen their position to the East was intensified by the recovery of a document revealing French plans to "isolate the British in Europe before launching a land and sea war against them in Asia." The urgency to act on this information may explain the rather hasty decision to send the First Fleet out to Botany Bay. The area was not resurveyed to reconfirm Cook and Bank's observations, as had all the other areas that had been suggested. Word from British spies about a French expedition by La Perouse to inspect the timber of New Zealand, and the possible establishment of a settlement further hastened Arthur Phillip with his First Fleet. When Phillip arrived in Botany Bay on February 1, before even unloading stores or disembarking passengers, he immediately ordered Philip Gidley King to proceed to Norfolk Island with a party, presumably to beat other European nations. It is clear that foreign policy competition for the area motivated Britain to work quickly.

Thus, the evidence strongly suggests that Britain had several reasons for choosing to establish a penal colony at Botany Bay. Though overcrowded hulks and gaols may certainly have been a stimulus for the choice of Botany Bay, many other things factored into the final decision. The government certainly was not ignorant to the presence of vast supplies of flax, hemp and timber in Norfolk Island and New Zealand. Cook and Banks offered plenty of information about the abundance and extraordinary quality of these

---

10 Cook in Frost, *Convicts and Empire*, p. 123.
12 Frost, *Convicts and Empire*, p. 94.
products, while Young, Matra and Call repeatedly referred to this fact in their proposals. Likewise the possibility of New South Wales becoming an integral port for Pacific trading networks was anything but secret. In addition, it is clear that countries such as France were interested in the area as well, and that this competition undoubtedly had some influence on Britain's actions. It is impossible to assert that Britain chose Botany Bay as the location to establish a penal colony for only one reason. Few decisions in life, if any, are made without looking at the larger picture, and certainly not a choice like this one. It is human nature, and not an 'ulterior motive,' that guides us toward the option with the greatest benefit. In this case, Botany Bay offered Britain a little bit of everything: a solution to its transportation problem, an extraordinary naval store, and a strategic port for trade and defense in the Pacific. What more could Britain ask for?